

February is Black History Month, a time for all Americans to come together in recognition and appreciation for the great impact that African-Americans have had on American history and culture.

Some folks may not realize that many influential and important African-Americans have come from cities and towns in Georgia's 12th Congressional District. From music to politics to sports to music to the Civil Rights Movement, the impact these Georgians have had on our country is immense.

W.W. LAW (b. 1923 – d. 2002), Savannah

Born and raised in Savannah, Georgia, W.W. Law is most famous for leading the Savannah Branch NAACP for 26 years, shepherding the organization through the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement – the reason why he was known by many as “Mr. Civil Rights.” Inspired in part by his pastor, Rev. Ralph Mark Gilbert, W.W. Law believed in using nonviolent means to bring about social change, and he planned sit-ins at lunch counters, wade-ins at Tybee Beach, and boycotts of locations throughout Savannah that helped bring about equal rights for African-Americans.

After the Civil Rights Movement, Law became a vocal advocate for African-American Arts, History, and Culture throughout Savannah, establishing the King-Tisdell Cottage Foundation, the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum, the Beach Institute of African-American Culture, and the Negro Heritage Trail Tour.

CURTIS COOPER (b. 1932 – d. 2000), Savannah

A tireless advocate for the indigent, Curtis V. Cooper was actively involved in the NAACP, serving as a leader in his local Youth Council, and later becoming president of the Savannah Branch NAACP.

In health care, Cooper made a great impact in the Savannah community. A tireless advocate for access to health care for the indigent, he secured funds for the establishment of a community health center in Savannah, a health center that he became the executive director of and which now bears his name. He was one of the first African-American members of Memorial Medical Center's board of directors, and he served as the chairman of the Chatham County Hospital Authority twice. Today, his legacy lives on through the health centers he established that serve as a primary health centers in downtown Savannah, Hitch Village, and Garden City.

JUDGE JACK RUFFIN (b. 1934 - d. 2010), Waynesboro / Augusta

Born in Waynesboro and a pioneer in the African-American community in Augusta, Judge Jack Ruffin passed away tragically in January 2010. The Morehouse and Howard educated Judge Ruffin was a Civil Rights-era lawyer in Augusta who fought for the desegregation of the Augusta public schools. Throughout his career, he fought for equal justice under the law for African-Americans in Georgia.

Later, he became the first African-American member of the Augusta Bar Association, the first African-American Superior Court judge in Augusta, and the first African-American chief judge of the Georgia state Court of Appeals. He was known as a sharp, witty, tireless fighter for the downtrodden.

LUCY CRAFT LANEY (b. 1854 – d. 1933), Augusta

Educated at a time when very few African-Americans were allowed to learn to read and write, Lucy Craft Laney established Augusta's very first school for African-American boys and girls with only a few children, very little money, and a small location in a church basement. Under her leadership, the school grew by leaps and bounds. Renamed the Haines Normal and Industrial Institute after a generous donor in the Presbyterian Church, Mrs. Francine Haines, the school went on to educate many African-American children in the Augusta area. Furthering her belief that African-American children needed an education to get ahead, Ms. Laney went on to establish Augusta's first African-American kindergarten and nursing school.

After her death, Lucy C. Laney High School in Augusta was named in her honor, as was Laney-Walker Boulevard (jointly named after Ms. Laney and Rev. C.T. Walker). Her former home in Augusta is now the Lucy C. Laney Museum of Black History, and her official portrait hangs today in the Georgia State Capitol, as a tribute to her lifetime of achievement.

RALPH MARK GILBERT (b. 1899 – d. 1956), Savannah

Born in Jacksonville, FL, Reverend Ralph Mark Gilbert was the pastor at Savannah's venerable First African Baptist – the "Oldest Black Church in North America" – from 1939 until his death in 1956. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Rev. Gilbert was actively involved in the African-American community in Savannah. Adhering to the principles of nonviolent protest, he reorganized and led the Savannah Branch NAACP and organized and was the first president of the Georgia Conference of the NAACP. While leading the organization, over 40 NAACP chapters were organized across the state.

In Savannah, he also launched a voter registration for African-American voters, and as a powerful voting block, they elected reform-minded leaders for the City of Savannah. In 1947, due in large part to Rev. Gilbert's efforts, the City of Savannah became one of the first cities in the South to hire African-American policemen. While his presence can be seen across the city – people still flock to the Ralph Mark Gilbert Civil Rights Museum, and the West Broad Street

YMCA that he founded is still a bedrock in the Savannah community – he also left a legacy in the people he mentored, such as W.W. Law, who went on to also serve as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement in Savannah.

CHARLES THOMAS WALKER (b. 1858 – d. 1921), Hephzibah / Augusta

Born into slavery in Hephzibah in 1858, Charles T. Walker found Jesus while hoeing a stalk of cotton. He was baptized and sent by his uncle to study at the Augusta Theological Institute. Despite being destitute, Rev. Walker was determined to finish his studies, sometimes eating only two meals a week to save money.

He became the pastor at Beulah Baptist Church in Augusta and had the church renamed Tabernacle Baptist Church. He became a well-known preacher, giving sermons across the country, and even got the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land and England. He founded a newspaper for the African-American community in Augusta, the Augusta Sentinel, and founded the Walker Baptist Institute, which educated young African-American boys until it closed in 1938.

His church, Tabernacle Baptist Church, sits today on Laney-Walker Boulevard, jointly named after Rev. Walker and Lucy Craft Laney. In addition, the C.T. Walker Magnet School educates elementary and middle school students from all over Richmond County today.

JOHN WESLEY GILBERT (b. 1864 – d. 1923), Hephzibah

Like Charles T. Walker, John Wesley Gilbert was born to slaves in Hephzibah, GA. After working his way through public schools in Augusta, Gilbert studied at Paine College, an HBCU in Augusta. He became the first graduate of Paine College and received assistance to study at Brown University, where he became the school's first African-American graduate. A voracious learner skilled at foreign languages, Gilbert became fluent in the Greek language and studied for a period of time in Athens, where he quickly became interested in archaeology. Among his many other firsts, he is considered to be one of the first ever African-American archaeologists.

Upon returning to the United States in 1891, Gilbert joined the faculty at Paine College as its first African-American professor. In 1895, he joined the ministry in the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) church, through which he led a mission trip to Senegal in 1911-1912. In addition to his work for his church and his alma mater, he wrote countless articles published on archaeology and even became adept at business – a veritable Renaissance man. Today, the chapel at Paine College bears his name.

JAMES BROWN (b. 1933 – d. 2006), Augusta

James Brown was known worldwide as the “Godfather of Soul,” but his dancing, singing, and ability to amaze on a wide variety of instruments—from harmonica, to guitar, to keyboard, to drums—earned him the reputation of being the “hardest working man in show business.” And while he suffered through addiction through much of his personal life, his public life was one of nonstop entertainment successes.

Born into poverty in Augusta, Brown’s early life was one of scraping by with odd jobs and petty crimes, until he turned his attention to music. His career spanned five decades, and he became a veritable hit machine. In 2004, Rolling Stones magazine released the list of the 500 greatest songs of all time, and 6 James Brown songs were included in the list. In addition to his superstar status as a musician, Brown was active in the 1960’s and the 1970’s in the Civil Rights movement, writing and performing songs that spoke to the African-American struggle for equal rights and self-empowerment, most notably his single, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud!” In addition to giving a voice to a movement, he was a trailblazer in funk and soul music, whose music will be enjoyed, and whose legacy will live on, for many years to come.

JESSYE NORMAN (b. 1945), Augusta

One of the highest paid performers in American classical music, Jessye Norman was born to a family of musicians in Augusta in 1945. After attending Augusta public schools, she went on to study at Howard University, graduating with a degree in music. She then enrolled in the Peabody Conservatory and the University of Michigan, where she earned a Masters Degree in music.

A dramatic soprano, Norman has performed in operas and recitals literally around the globe. She has received countless awards and medals from universities, organizations, and even nations around the globe. In 2006, she received a lifetime achievement Grammy Award, and in 1997, she received the highest honor bestowed in the United States for performing arts, the Kennedy Center Honors. The performance amphitheater at the riverwalk in downtown Augusta bears her name.

HERSCHEL WALKER (b. 1962), Wrightsville

Ask any Bulldog football fan who the greatest Georgia player of all time is, and chances are good they’ll tell you it was Herschel Walker.

Born in Wrightsville in 1962, Walker played running back for the Georgia Bulldogs, helping lead the team to win the National Championship in 1980. From the start, his skill was apparent, and he led the NCAA in rushing yards for a freshman in 1980 and finished third in the balloting for the Heisman Trophy. Through his career, he earned consensus All-American honors three

straight years, set 10 NCAA records, and in 1982, he won the Heisman Trophy, the last Georgia Bulldog player to do so. Walker also played in the NFL from 1986 – 1997, with two consecutive pro Bowl seasons in 1986 and 1987. He was also inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1999, and his #34 jersey was retired by the University of Georgia.

In his 2008 memoir, *Breaking Free*, Walker divulged that he had suffered from dissociative identity disorder for many years, and he now does work advocating for people afflicted with dissociative identity disorder, providing them with avenues to receive help.

SHANNON SHARPE (b. 1968), Glennville / Savannah

Raised in Glennville, Shannon Sharpe attended Savannah State College (now Savannah State University), becoming the most successful athlete to ever graduate from the school. While at Savannah State, Sharpe competed in football, basketball, and the triple jump, excelling in all three.

As a tight end, he played in the NFL from 1990-2003, winning pro Bowl honors every year from 1992-1998, and then again in 2001. He was the first tight end to ever reach 10,000 yards receiving and finished his career with 62 touchdowns and three Super Bowl rings – 2 with Denver and 1 with Baltimore.

Today, Shannon Sharpe continues to be a presence in the National Football League, serving as a commentator for CBS Sports. In his broadcasts, Sharpe's especially well-known for his sharp suits and clever, sometimes taunting, commentary. In 2009, Sharpe's jersey was retired by Savannah State University.